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Review of William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*

Abstract

Toilets, plumbers, and development economists. This book is provocative at several levels—designed to disturb the professional development specialist and force a change in the public discourse on economic development. Does Easterly really mean to criticize the accumulated knowledge of so many who have fought so hard to bring knowledge and empiricism to the forefront of development? Yes and no. Yes, because he views accumulated knowledge or "expertise" as being consciously or unconsciously biased against those who strive hard (on their own) for success. No, because he recognizes, as reflected in the above quote, that knowledge (read *experts*) can really save lives and make the world a better place.

Disciplines

Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Growth and Development | International and Comparative Education

traction of “extra study.” Thus, the authors attempt to understand the conditions under which inequality and social injustice flourish.

One of the most comprehensive empirical research projects presented in this volume is written by Chona S. Sandoval and Cecilia V. Soriano and deals with the Education Service Contracting scheme in the Philippines. The authors explicitly examine whether this particular public-private partnership scheme has benefited the marginalized and how it fared in terms of efficiency, equity, sensitivity, and social cohesion. While the findings are not that promising in terms of benefits for the target audience in the Philippines, the authors end their chapter with a list of nuanced and concrete policy recommendations on how to “fix” the scheme so that it benefits the marginalized.

Finally, Curtis B. Riep scrutinizes the claim of the Omega Schools Franchise in Ghana whereby it supposedly serves the poor. The franchise was established by education entrepreneur James Tooley and financial investor Ken Donkoh in 2009 and received ample financial support from the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund (PALF). I predict that the alliance between Omega and Pearson will trigger a myriad of fascinating studies on the end of education for the common good. In his chapter, Riep refutes the claim that Omega schools represent “low-fee private schools” and cites Michael Barber (chairman of PALF) for saying: “It’s absolutely for-profit. But get this right—it’s important to demonstrate profit because we want other investors to come in” (264). What follows is Riep’s thorough analysis that details the features of the Omega schools franchise that are in fact good (for) business, that is, standardization of services, brand reliability, pay as you learn, and cheap cost of labor/teachers.

As mentioned above, the chapters of *Education, Privatisation, and Social Justice* represent a wide spectrum of topics related to privatization without directly addressing the question of how privatization relates to equity or social justice. Nevertheless, the merits of this book lie in its thought-provoking research questions (which are presented in the introductory chapter), as well as its research about and from researchers in developing countries. These are not small feats for an edited volume that breaks new ground in terms of topic as well as the composition of its contributors.

GITA STEINER-KHAMSI

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The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor by William Easterly. New York: Basic Books, 2014. 394 pp. \$29.99.

When my toilet stops working, I am grateful for the expert plumber. When I get giardia, I am grateful for the expert doctor who prescribes *Flagyl*. Experts in sanitation, health, and education offer huge benefits for the world’s poor. . . . This book is not about condemning all expertise, it is about distinguishing between good and bad ambitions for expertise in development. (16)

Toilets, plumbers, and development economists. This book is provocative at several levels—designed to disturb the professional development specialist and force a change in the public discourse on economic development. Does Easterly really mean to criticize the accumulated knowledge of so many who have fought so hard to bring knowledge and empiricism to the forefront of development? Yes and no. Yes, because he views accumulated knowledge or “expertise” as being consciously or unconsciously biased against those who strive hard (on their own) for success. No, because he recognizes, as reflected in the above quote, that knowledge (read *experts*) can really save lives and make the world a better place.

This book engages the reader by focusing on stories of development across several past centuries. It’s a good read when railing against professional expertise doesn’t get in the way. For example, chapter 2 lays out what Easterly refers to as a fundamental debate between two Nobel Prize-winning economists more than a half-century ago: Gunnar Myrdal and Friedrich Hayek. In Easterly’s view, these two economists view the world through opposite lenses—the former supported a more socialist and top-down approach of “social engineering,” while the latter focused on the defense of individual rights, a more bottom-up approach that involved “spontaneous solutions” through market competition. Those familiar with Easterly’s *White Man’s Burden* (2006) will see a connection to why he views Hayek as a largely forgotten hero of economic development. This is because Easterly sees the Myrdal-Hayek contrast—and the largely ascendant focus of economic development as sustained by knowledgeable experts and their supporting international agencies (especially the World Bank)—as the cause of what he calls the “blindness to rights violations by the colonial autocrats” who sought development that was inspired by colonialism and racism (45). This is powerful stuff, and serves as the basis of Easterly’s indictment of contemporary development economists and other “experts.”

Easterly then proceeds with an illuminating (and at times devastating) stroll through development history, with a particular focus on the racist beliefs of many of the great men in colonial and postcolonial efforts to “improve” the world. Take, for example, the liberal British biologist Julian Huxley (who later became the first director-general of UNESCO), who claimed that “the African ‘native’ had a ‘childlike belief in the white as an inherently superior being’ ” (50). Easterly goes on, in chapter 3, to discuss colonialism of the Japanese and (later) the Americans in China, and how what he terms the expert “scientific” approach to development mostly led to authoritarianism, loss of basic human rights, and destitution at the individual level. Chapter 4 traces a parallel trajectory in Africa, often with similar results, undertaken by different colonial regimes. He describes what he calls the “scientific approach” to development, which serves to make economic growth “an excuse to postpone indefinitely any native demands for political rights” (89). In other words, development has served as a means (both conscious and unconscious) of convincing broad sectors of society (including the progressive global leadership), that they were “doing good,” while in fact they were providing a panacea for failed attempts to deal with the real issues of human rights and dignity.

In chapter 5, Easterly comes to one of his main points—the inherent flaws of the World Bank (where he once worked), established in 1949. In the World Bank’s work, the term “mission” is still used to describe overseas development activities, which Easterly sees as reinforcing overtones of its missionary zeal. Indeed, he sees the

creation of the World Bank at the Bretton Woods Conference as an “original sin” because it included a founding article (Article IV, Section 10) that forced it to be “nonpolitical” and therefore purely technocratic in its approach. Easterly calls this the “blank slate” approach, claiming that to be nonpolitical means ahistorical, and thus, in his words “authoritarian” rather than “free development.” At this point, and in chapters 6–8, Easterly sketches several historical examples, from the Holy Roman Empire to Singapore and Ethiopia, and even New York City from the 1600s to the present—each time pausing to relay how freedom and development must go together, while top-down repression inhibits development. The stories themselves, and the historical research contained therein, are enriching and at times compelling.

The final sections of *Tyranny* make the case for a focus on individuals as contrasted with nations—as Easterly puts it: for Zambians rather than for Zambia. When he worked at the World Bank, Easterly says that he focused part of his time on a project entitled “How Do National Policies Affect Long-Run Growth?” This, Easterly states, captures very well the “nation-centric mentality” of the World Bank—the planned economic approach that pushed developing countries toward overly planned economies. Easterly continues with a broadside critique of Jim Yong Kim, the recently named president of the World Bank, who, in Easterly’s view, “represents the consensus view, now decades-old, that conscious design offers the best hope for ending poverty” (237), the opposite of the market-based individual-centered approach espoused in the book. He offers a typical case example of an internet-based economic development project in sub-Saharan Africa in which the “top-down leaders and experts” failed to understand the local context and created “young men watching porn” instead.

Easterly gives us numerous quotable examples over a broad sweep of history and culture of how the best-intentioned plans of experts end up with little or even counterproductive outcomes. His answer, put simply, is that the poor should have the same rights as the rich, and that implementing equal rights would be a better way to solve development problems. He views successful development as being a result of hardworking individualists and families, with little outside interference.

In the end, Easterly makes a strong, if very selective, case for the importance of *not* listening to development experts, who have, in his view, probably done more harm than good in terms of social and economic development, hence their *tyranny*. As with earlier writings, he has again drawn a proverbial line in the sand—arguing against those who confidently promote development as a scientifically justified and evidence-based set of problems to solve.

What should readers learn from this book? No doubt, for those who see the cup of development as half-empty, Easterly’s views and examples will provide additional ammunition for resisting the overly planned and arrogant use of power and resources to impose views of development on those who cannot resist. For those who see development as half-full—that planners and developers do their best in spite of daunting obstacles that limit success—this book will appear as another confrontational harangue that will make their life even more difficult.

Easterly is not condemning all expertise. He asks those working on economic development to distinguish “between good and bad ambitions for expertise” (16). This is a respectable goal. Nonetheless, we are still left with the question of who defines good and bad, who owns development, what role major international agen-

cies should play, and when knowledge and expertise can make a difference. While this book helps remind us of development's checkered history, it ought not become the latest tool for dismantling the important and positive work of economic development today.

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National Identity and Educational Reform: Contested Classrooms by Elizabeth Anderson Worden. New York: Routledge, 2014. 166 pp. \$145.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-41571-954-4.

Since the collapse of the socialist bloc in 1989, comparative education research has benefited from a growing body of literature on postsocialist education transformations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. This literature has critically addressed the relationship of postsocialism to theorizations on globalization, convergence, modernity, and education policy borrowing. It has also challenged our understanding of time and space in theorizing education reforms within rapidly changing geopolitical contexts. Elizabeth Anderson Worden's book *National Identity and Educational Reform: Contested Classrooms* makes an important contribution to this budding literature.

Anderson Worden takes up the challenge of examining the role of education—especially the role of school textbooks—in a struggle over national identity in post-Soviet Moldova. The book focuses on the highly contested reform of the national history curriculum, which was introduced in Moldova's schools in the first decade of this century. Aiming to reverse the decades of Soviet influence, many teachers in Moldovan schools relied on history textbooks donated by the Romanian government in the early 1990s. This was a short-term solution, which provided the necessary time for Moldovan historians to develop their own textbooks. In 1997, the World Bank sponsored the development of two new textbook series, which included the *History of the Romanians*. However, a national history textbook that included the name of another nation (and state) in its title did not fit well with the Moldovan government's nation-building strategy. It was also criticized by international experts. In response to local politics and international critique, the government announced the introduction of a new history textbook series in the early 2000s—*Integrated History*—to cultivate a distinctly Moldovan (as opposed to Romanian) identity among school students. Launched in 2006, this reform only lasted for a few years, eventually resulting in the revision and renaming of the history curriculum to *The History of the Romanians*, while maintaining an integrated approach to teaching history. *National Identity and Educational Reform* captures the controversies surrounding the history of textbook reform in Moldova, vividly demonstrating how history itself is being restored, written, revised, and rewritten.

National Identity and Educational Reform is based on extensive field research that has all of the ingredients of a well-thought-through case study. First, it offers an in-depth understanding of the historical, political, and social contexts within which the Moldovan textbook reform took place. Having spent extended periods of time in Moldova (1997–99, 2004, and 2008), Anderson Worden has intimate insight into and